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SCHOLARSHIPS FOR WORKING CHILDREN

BY MRS. FLORENCE KELLEY,
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The State of New York established five years ago the requirement that children must finish the work of the fifth grade of the public school or its equivalent, must have working papers *before* they leave school, and must get from the old country (if they come from the old country) documentary proof that they are at least fourteen years old. We do not believe a child's statement, or its parents' or teacher's statement as to its age. It must bring documentary proof from the place where it was born. Besides this children must be fourteen years old according to the school records; must be able by actual examination by a physician of the board of health to read and write simple sentences in the English language and must, in the opinion of an official physician, be of the normal stature of children of their age, in good health, and fit for the work which they say they are about to undertake.

Those children who cannot bring documentary proof of their age have to pass a medical examination, to wait ninety days from the day when they say that they cannot get their documentary evidence—to stay on in school while they try, and the board of health tries, and the principal of the school tries, to get it. There have been enough exceptional cases in which evidence has been obtained from Russia to make it seem always worth trying. Documentary evidence has been obtained from every other nation in Europe, from Turkey, Syria, from most unexpected places, real documentary evidence of the age of children by sending to the proper official and waiting for the reply sometimes about sixty days.

It is required that children must know something before they leave school, not merely that they be fourteen years old, but that they know something. Not even the word of the teacher or the principal that they know something suffices. The children themselves are examined. They must show by the signed statement of the principal and the teacher that they have attended school for five

years and then they must also prove what they know at the board of health office by really reading and writing there.

It was said when the statute requiring that was enacted that there would be bitter hardship. So the experiment was made of providing scholarships. I think we have never spent as much as \$5,000 a year in any one year in a city of four million people. We cannot hope to meet all the need of the children for scholarships by private gifts. I do not think it likely that we shall be able to spend much more than that in the near future because it is not easy to raise increasing amounts of money for the purpose from private charity, and it ought not to be private charity at all.

The one state in this country which faces the situation is Ohio, which also requires that children shall know something and that they shall prove their age; that they shall not work at night; that girls even to the eighteenth birthday shall not work longer than eight hours in a day and not after six o'clock at night. Ohio is more logical than we in New York, and says that since the community reduces very materially the earning power of the children, and of these young girls, it behooves the community, not private charity, to provide for them, and it is obligatory upon the school officials that they shall do that. The county must furnish the money, the school officials must provide books and shoes, and what is needed to keep the children efficiently in school. I am told that in Cincinnati cases of need discovered by the school authorities are investigated by the Charity Organization Society and the need met as stated to exist by that organization.

We are not so civilized in New York. We leave it to charity, and we have for some few years had a maximum of \$5,000 a year, roughly speaking, to spend. The hardship inflicted by this moderate requirement that children should finish the work of the fifth grade of the public schools is much less than was anticipated. It is astonishing how great a number of our school children are nowhere near the starvation line, how the working people do support and feed, and educate, and take care of, and start in life their own children. The candidates for scholarships are chiefly the children of the recently immigrated, who do not get five years of the public schools before they reach their fourteenth birthday, and children who have had illness in the family; perhaps the mother may have been ill and they have stayed at home to help her, or the father has been ill and

they have worked illegally when they should have been in school. There has been irregularity of some kind.

If all our children went to school as they should, if they went to kindergartens which are there, from three to six years of age, and to school from six to fourteen—went regularly and behaved themselves—they ought to be ready to go to work not only from the fifth grade but from the eighth when they are fourteen years old. The conundrum that confronts us incessantly is, Who are these children who are between fourteen and sixteen years old and not yet through the fifth grade?

If they are sub-normal children, of course the question is answered. There are 1,600 children in the classes for the sub-normal in New York City who are being kept in school until they are sixteen years old, because even at sixteen they will not have finished the work of the fifth grade. This is one of the most humane and enlightened things done in New York, that instead of saying "These children are stupid and cannot learn anything, therefore let us send them out to sell papers on the streets or to do simple work", New York says, on the contrary, "Because these children are slow therefore let us give them additional time."

There are occasional applications for other scholarships for children who cannot make the fifth grade, for example, from the huge families, with sickly father and mother and nine children, of whom nobody is earning anything, and the whole nine have yet to go through school. Those present very grave problems to people who wish to furnish scholarships forever from private charity. I believe that Ellis Island might be asked to look far more closely than it has hitherto done at the quality of the breadwinner when there are from five to twelve young children.

Massachusetts asks only that her children shall be able to read enough to enter the fourth grade before they go to work. New York has long asked that they shall finish the fifth. From Mr. Cheney we learn that it is the exception when children of Connecticut are asked to finish the sixth. One state, New Jersey, demands that children shall finish the work of the eighth grade before they go to work. Why have we this multitude who have learned so sadly little, that they have to have scholarships when they are old enough to work but do not know enough?

One useful thing that our scholarships do is to enable us to trace

the child and attach it to the school official who has let it become derelict. We find every degree of non-attendance at school, from the little girl who has been eight years in New York, five years in the same house but never in a school (though her younger brothers and sisters have been going regularly), and the school authorities have never been interested to learn that she existed till she is found illegally at work by the factory inspector and turned over to us at fourteen or fifteen, a candidate for a scholarship. It is a valuable thing to attach that little girl to the truant officer who let that happen. That, perhaps, is one of the most useful things that a committee can do, which is administering private charity in the form of scholarships as distinguished from the public authorities administering in a general way, as the Ohio authorities do, the money required by law for the children.

Surely the weakest point in our whole child labor legislation is the failure of the schools, not only to teach the children that which will be industrially useful to them, but to teach them anything; to keep them in school day by day, week by week, month by month and year by year, until they learn the things which we say in our laws we require them to learn, but which, because of an apparently universal slackness, we do not in any one industrial community really require of all the children or of all the schools.